

Tracking digital impact: The challenge of evidencing impact

by Blog Admin

July 19, 2012

*How can we prove that academic presence on social media is creating an impact? **Elizabeth Tait** and **Jennifer Holden** question how to demonstrate more than just a social media presence as they develop a standard for assessing the impact of digital engagement.*



Like many research institutions who receive funding from public money, [dot.rural](#) have to provide evidence that we're having an impact outside of academia. We have developed a public engagement strategy that includes both face-to-face and digital engagement activities and have dedicated members of staff for [Training and Outreach](#) and [Impact evaluation](#). In this blog we'd like to share our experiences of trying to engage non-academic users using digital media and the challenges of evidencing this. We'll also introduce a JISC-funded project that we're participating in along with Exeter (who are our lead partner) and Plymouth Universities called [Tracking Digital Impact](#) (TDI) which brings together researchers and Business and Community Engagement (BCE) practitioners who develop and interact with digital resources and digital events for disseminating research as a pathway to impact. This project will see the development of a set of standards for monitoring and assessing the impact of digital engagement.



[dot.rural](#) is a large multi-disciplinary research hub funded through the [RCUK Digital Economy Programme](#) which started in 2009. The Hub has a large team of researchers (79) working in and across the disciplines of computer science, communications engineering, human geography, sociology, transport studies, health sciences and environmental science. [dot.rural](#) explores the challenges and opportunities for rural communities across the UK, and developing transformational technology to support rural communities. As part of our [public engagement](#) remit we have conducted a wide variety of 'face to face' activities such as talks and workshops by researchers in rural communities, 'Speed Science' (not to be confused with speed dating!) in pubs and schools and demos at events such as [Techfest](#) and the forthcoming [British Science Festival](#). These activities are relatively easy to evaluate because we can count how many people attended and give out evaluation forms to participants attending.

As well as these face to face activities we have created an online presence through the [dot.rural](#) website and social media ([Facebook](#), [twitter](#), [YouTube](#), blog). We recently took part in the Digital Economy Impact Review which involved collating evidence of impact into a coherent and robust document to present to the review panel. We found that certain research activities (publications, funding, collaborations with industry etc) were reasonably easy to provide evidence for... but providing evidence that our digital engagement activities were having a demonstrable impact was much harder. This caused us to reflect on our digital impact strategy as it was clear that while we had made progress with setting up various channels for digital communication that these could be better embedded in the work of the research teams and that we needed more reliable ways to evidence their impact.

Changes include:

- Developing a formal social media strategy so that researchers know the basic dos and don'ts of using social media for research communication and developing protocols for what content should be posted, what should be shared from other people and how to engage and interact with other social media users.
- Relaunching the [dot.rural](#) website which is now more research focused and has more pages devoted to the work of research teams and using google analytics to monitor traffic to the website.
- Revising our [twitter](#) strategy to be better linked with the other digital engagement activities and using

Hootsuite for scheduling tweets and monitoring retweets and mentions.

- Creating a [Facebook](#) 'page' rather than the previous 'friend' account and using Facebook page insights to monitor activities.
- Planning to relaunch our blog which has fallen into abeyance due to technical issues
- Developing more [YouTube](#) videos for the channel.

The TDI project comes at a good time for us as we can conduct comparative analysis of our relaunched digital communication strategy, engage in knowledge exchange with partners and contribute to the new processes and guidelines for research communication. Developing these are important for two main reasons.

First, if researchers can't tell whether or not their digital engagement activities are actually reaching the right audience and what (if any) impact they are having outside academia there is no way of knowing whether they are wasting their time creating and curating content for social media channels. After all, public engagement and research communication can be time consuming and researchers have many other activities that they have to do such as project work and publishing.

Secondly, in order to evidence outreach and communication activities to funding bodies and write impact narratives you have to be able to demonstrate more than just having a presence on social media. You need to show that you have a clear strategy for public engagement that has processes in place for monitoring and evaluating impact. This needs to go beyond merely recording the number of followers on twitter, the number of views a YouTube video has had and the number of views of a web page.

The next steps of our work on the TDI project are a survey and interviews with researchers to find out about their experiences of using digital technologies for public engagement and research communication. We would like to know about their contributions both at the 'project' level and their individual activities. We wonder, for example, if there are differences between disciplines and between researchers at different stages of their careers. We would like to find out how researchers evaluate impact (if at all), what the benefits of using social and other digital media for public engagement has been and if there have been any negative impacts such as not having enough time for other activities or a negative impact on work/life balance. The questionnaire will initially be conducted amongst dot.rural staff but we are happy to make it available for other research groups to use and it would be interesting to compare findings.

We are keen to hear thoughts and experiences from other research groups and teams as many researchers are facing similar challenges of developing an effective digital strategy for public engagement and impact, so please get in touch if you'd like to share your thoughts or experiences.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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